

# Five Million Yen: Chapter 32

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Ben, Gabe and Pascal left the restaurant and walked back toward the Opera.

-That was a terrific lunch, Gabe, said Ben.

-Yes, Café de Turin is an excellent shell restaurant, added Gabe.

-Let's get off this noisy avenue and cut through the *Le vieux Nice*, said Pascal. It's also more scenic.

The narrow streets were crowded with tourists and people coming from lunch. The three of them could not walk side-by-side. When they were near the Opera, they were able to converse.

-So how do I get the painting to Marseille? asked Ben.

-Good question, replied Pascal

Gabe walked in front of them and stopped them.

-Here's what we do. Ben takes the train to Antibes. We meet him and hand him the painting. He gets back on the same train and goes to Marseille. If someone tails him to the train, they will see that he is not carrying the painting. Meanwhile, Pascal and I will sneak the two bogus picture boxes into my hotel room.

-He'll *never* arrive in Marseille in time to deliver the painting and catch Train Bleu, if he travels on the local train, shot back Pascal.

-Let's think about this. I think it is the germ of a plan. We just have to modify the mechanics to make it work.

-Wait a minute, said Ben. What do we really *know*? We know that someone in authority in France, and maybe even in America, knows

that I, aka Ben Adoyan or Ben Clarone, brought two paintings to Nice from New York. They probably know, or suspect, there is something unusual about them, since I arrived in France as Benjamin Adoyan. I'm here on a false passport, birth certificate and driver's license. My ass is on the line. We know at least one person is shadowing my every move. I know, and they probably do also, since my name is on posters all over France, that I have a big gig to play as the person I really am: Ben Clarone. To get the instrument I need for the gig, I have to deliver one more painting in Marseille and then travel to Paris to exchange a three-piece 100 franc note to someone who will direct me to the place where I can find my contrabass clarinet. I then come back to Nice and hopefully play my gig.

-But, Ben, who told you to travel under an assumed name? asked Pascal.

-Gringovitch's friend, Dan Arris. But, you see, when they asked *me* to do this, I didn't have a passport, driver's license or birth certificate, they had been stolen.

-Ben, who got you the fictitious passport and ID's, asked Pascal.

-Dan Arris.

-Did you tell Arris when you got a replacement Ben Clarone passport?

-No, I didn't like the guy and I didn't want my real name messed up in his business. He pulled a gun on me at Gringovitch's house one night.

-Pleasant people you pick as partners, Ben. Send you to a restaurant in Nice that has been blown up by some crazy Corsican political group, or maybe even the French government for all we know, and one of your cohorts pulls a gun on you.

-Well, Gabe, it's not all that simple. You know I'm a boyhood friend of Gringovitch. I would trust him with my life, and vice-versa.

-Too much crazy English for me to follow, said Pascal shaking his head. Let's get the easy jobs done first, like cutting up French money and making boxes stuffed with bad paintings.

They continued their walk to the Opera. There they got in Pascal's van and headed towards the mountains to Aspremont, north of Nice, where Pascal's studio was located.

Ben enjoyed the mountain scenery as they wound up route D4 through Gairaut and its cascade, past Mont Chauvre d'Aspremont and finally arriving at Aspremont.

-This is beautiful, said Ben. Look there's snow on the distant Alps.

-Those are actually the pre-Alps, but it is pretty, especially in winter with the snow on the mountains, said Pascal. That's why I picked this place to build my working studio.

-I can also see the blue Mediterranean Sea.

-On a clear day you can almost make out Corsica, Ben. But come inside, we have work to do. Give me the two parts of the hundred-franc note.

Ben handed over the two pieces. Gabe and Ben looked through their 100-franc notes. Gabe found one that was in the same condition as the cut-up one. He gave it to Pascal

Pascal put the whole note down on a cutting table and put the two pieces Ben gave him together on a tracing table. Parallel arms, one for cutting and one for tracing connected the two tables. By adjusting some lenses of the magnifiers over the two tables Pascal could superimpose the two pieces over the uncut 100-franc note. Inserting a glass scalpel in the cutting arm, Pascal carefully cut out the missing third piece from the whole note. The entire operation took him fifteen minutes.

-Let's see how I did, Ben, said Pascal. I don't want to use up all your notes.

Pascal put the three pieces together under his magnifier.

-Perfect as always, he laughed. Now to make some boxes. Ben, how big were those paintings?

-Ah ... about a meter square, don't you think, Gabe?

Gabe made some measurements in the air with his arms.

-That seems about right.

-Two painting boxes a meter square coming up. I even think I have some old set décor paintings that we can put in the boxes.

In another fifteen minutes, Pascal had made two picture boxes and had packaged up two *gouache* paintings.

-Let's get back to Nice, said Gabe. Time is flying. We still have to figure out how to get the painting to Ben without him being seen carrying a painting to the train station.

The three men sat in silence in the van as Pascal negotiated the winding road back down to Nice.

-Man, there sure are a lot of bicyclists on this road, said Ben.

-It's a main training route for all the pro and amateur cycling teams in the area. They can get to some serious climbing in a relatively short time. This road was built by the Romans and is only a 6% grade at its steepest. Those pros we just saw, they go up this at twenty miles per hour, or more, and they are talking and joking all the way. They blow by the teenagers on their little *motors* who can barely make fifteen miles per hour on this pitch, especially if they have a girlfriend, or a buddy on the back.

-Must be nice to bicycle in this country, said Ben.

-It's one of the best places in the world, said Pascal. Some of the local clubs ride into Italy and even almost up to Switzerland on weekends. There are beautiful parks and narrow, mostly traffic-free roads.

-Maybe I can rent a bike and do some riding while I'm here, said Ben.

-You don't have to rent a bike; I have a couple of nice road bikes. I don't know if you know bikes, but I have my dad's old 1950's Masi and two new De Rosa's.

-My brother had a Schwinn Paramount, said Ben, but he always wanted a top-of-the-line Italian bike. I rode his Paramount a few times. He glued his tires on the rims.

-Those tires are called tubular tires and are the preferred tires of racers and long distance riders, Ben.

-I don't think you'll have much time to ride with all the notes you're going to have to learn for this music gig, interrupted Gabe. Besides if they knew you were bombing around these roads on a

bike after what happened to the guy you're replacing as soloist with the Monte Carlo Orchestra, Arno Donax, they would chain you up.

-Yeah, that's probably true, said Ben, but maybe after the gig. This country just makes you want to ride a bike.

-Well, I have some local cycling buddies, said Pascal, that can show you the routes. You better have some legs though. Those guys have been riding here all their lives.

They passed under Autoroute A8 and descended down to Avenue Jean Medecin. Traffic was at a standstill.

-Typical Nice, remarked Gabe.

-We still have plenty of time; it's not quite two. We'll be at the Opera by two.

When they arrived at the Opera, Pascal went in to get the painting, *Abstract with Yellow*.

-Gabe, I forgot. Here's a telegram from Gringovitch. I think it says what mine said: that he screwed up and gave me a *wrong* painting. He gave me *The Black and The Red*, instead of *Big Wave*. I'm supposed to give you *The Black and The Red* to hold until he arrives from Rome in three weeks. *Big Wave* was supposed to go to Yolande of the blown-up restaurant.

-Pascal, set me straight here, what is the name of the painting you have?

-The papers say *Abstract with Yellow*.

-That's the one that goes to Marseille. I need to take that one, said Ben.

-I think Pascal should keep *The Black and the Red* in his locker at the Opera until I can put it in my bank tomorrow, or Monday, said Gabe.

-Monday, said Pascal, is All Souls Day, Gabe, a national holiday.

-Damn, I forgot.

-I still need to know how I am going to get *Abstract with Yellow* to Marseille without that guy Victor Taxi, whatever his name is, following me! demanded Ben.

Gabe read the telegram.

-Yeah, that's what Gringovitch writes. I have to store *The Black and The Red* until he arrives from Rome, But first, let's get these boxes back to my hotel. Pascal you take the van around to the back door. Ben, you ask the desk clerk about rates and availability. Play stupid, take a lot of time. I'll go open the back door and we can get the paintings up the stairs to my room without the clerk seeing them. Got it?

-Gabe, said Pascal, just take them up to your room. The clerk knows we took some packages out, and now you are putting some more in your room. We want the police to think they are there. If you are afraid to stay in your room, you can stay in my studio. Not the best, but it has a bed and a bathroom and you can use my motorbike.

-You're correct, Pascal, stupid of me to make complications.

-Christ, you two make all this sound like some cheesy *film noir* caper, complained Ben.

-Are you whining Ben? asked Gabe.

-Hey, bro, it's my ass that will get burned.

Pascal pulled the van around to the front door of *Beau Rivage*. Ben and Gabe got out with the two dummy picture boxes and the box containing *Abstract with Yellow* inside.

-I have to go back to the Opera to check on the rehearsal, but if you need me to drive you somewhere, call me. I'm close-by as you know. And Gabe, thanks for lunch and don't panic, this is France. Nothing but happy frogs here. *Bonne chance et bon courage, mes amis*

-*Ciao*, Pascal, the two men said in unison.

They entered the hotel and Gabe went to get the key to his room from the reception clerk.

-Ah, Monsieur Benjamin. You have a phone message from Mademoiselle Isabella Santizzare.

-*Merci*, Monsieur.

Gabe put the message in his pocket and the two men took the stairs up to Gabe's room.

-I wonder what Isabella wants, asked Ben.

-Well, I'll just call her and find out.

Gabe dialed an outside line and then the number. Ben could hear the phone ring.

-*Allo*.

-Isabella, this is Gabe Benjamin.

-Gabe, we have a problem.

-So do we.

-Me first, said Isabella. As you know, Claudia, the stewardess on your flight who injured her ankle, needs to get to Paris by Saturday. We have two solutions. Either I drive her to Paris, which will take twelve or more hours, or Ben accompanies her on the train since he is going to Paris.

-Let me think about this for a minute, Isabella. Can I call you back in two minutes?

-Absolutely.

Gabe hung up the phone and turned to Ben.

-I didn't want to be on the phone too long should the desk clerk lay a rabbit ear on my phone line. Here's the deal, they want you to accompany Claudia on the train to Paris. Either that, or Isabella has to drive her, and perhaps you, to Paris.

-But we know the art police or regular police are watching me. How do, I get this picture and me to Marseille? Once the delivery is done all I have to do is take the night train to Paris, deliver the complete 100 franc note to a guy at noon, pick up my contrabass and head back to Nice on the afternoon flight from Orly.

Gabe began pacing around the room.

-Look, here's the plan, Ben. You take the train to Antibes. Isabella and Claudia will meet you at the train station. They will have *Abstract with Yellow* in the car with them. Isabella will drive both of you to Marseille to your contact's address. You drop off the painting. You should get the other third of the 100-franc note as a receipt. If it blows up, you have Pascal's version. You and Claudia will take the train to Paris. Friday noon, you turn in the three parts of the 100-franc note and get your contrabass clarinet.

-Do you think Isabella will do that?

-I'll ask, he said dialing the phone.

-*Allo?*

-Isabella, Gabe. Come to my hotel with Claudia. We're going for a little sightseeing trip. Make sure Claudia has her bag. She may need to change her bandages.

-I understand perfectly. We will be there in fifteen minutes.

Gabe hung up the phone.

-Ben do you have all your papers? Make sure you have *both* passports and all your ID's, and do you have your train tickets?

-I'm checking. I'm checking. Stop being a Jewish mother.

Ben looked through his backpack and double-checked that he had all his tickets, and two sets of identities.

-OK, the plan sounds pleasant enough for me, traveling with two babes.

-You better hustle, we don't know the train schedules, but the local trains run pretty frequently. Keep your wits about you. And don't wear those sunglasses. You look like a thug. Take these Bausch & Lomb aviators.

-You know how to hurt a guy. I just bought these.

-Screw that, just be smart. See you tomorrow night or Saturday.

-Thanks for all your help Gabe.

-You won't thank me if you end up sweating in a French jail.

Ben left the room and went down the stairs with his backpack. When he left the hotel he noticed Victor Taxi parked down the street. He approached the vehicle.

-How much to take me to the Nice train station.

-Fifty francs.

-Too much.

-Forty francs.

-Thirty-five.

-Allez!.

Ben got in the taxi and watched the driver closely.

-Where are you going? asked the driver.

Ben had to think fast.



-To Monte Carlo.

-I can drive you there.

-Thanks, but I need to learn how to take the train. I will be doing it every day for three weeks.

-As you wish.

-Where in Monte Carlo are you going?

-The concert hall.

-Are you a musician?

-Yes, I am playing with the orchestra for the next three weeks.

Ben observed Victor, the taxi guy, watching him in the mirror.

-You speak very good English, said Ben, but like an American.

-Ah, it is good for a taxi driver to have many languages. There are many English tourists and English living in Monaco.

Traffic was the usual nightmare on Jean Medecin. Ben could have walked to the station in the same time as the car took to get there.

Ben paid Victor thirty-five francs and went into the station. He saw that a train was going to Monte Carlo in five minutes and in seven minutes another was going to Marseille stopping at all local stops. The two trains were on adjacent tracks. Ben's heart skipped a beat as he watched Victor, the taxi driver, walking into the waiting room heading to a ticket vending machine. Ben validated his ticket and walked onto the platform. He saw the underpass to the track platforms. He took the steps two at a time. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he sprinted to the Marseille-bound track, ran up the stairs and jumped on the Marseille bound train, found a seat and slouched down behind some other passengers.

The Monte Carlo-bound train slowly sped up as it pulled out of the station. Ben could see Victor standing in the doorway of one of the cars as it passed by on its way to Monte Carlo.

-*Bon voyage*, Victor Taxi, Ben said under his breath.

To be continued.

